



**Jason Caughey**

Volunteer Voice

## To merge or not to merge: Tough times prompt difficult discussions for volunteer departments

Reviewing benefits and risks of volunteer fire department mergers — and how to start the merger process for a smooth transition

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Who would have ever guessed as 2020 began that the American fire service would face such enormous global challenges in such a short amount of time? Never in my wildest dreams – you know, the dreams for which you designed the ultimate tabletop exercises, like the airplane crashes into the hospital and ruptures the gas line that blows up the bridge, preventing you from driving to the scene – did I foresee the challenges that we are facing today.

As the chief of a combination department that is extremely dependent on our volunteer membership, the last challenge I needed was **COVID-19** and **civil unrest** – and so many chiefs are in the same boat.

### **EXISTING STRUGGLES AND THE NEED FOR CHANGE**



A merger could provide the opportunity for two or more organizations to better serve their communities. (Photo/AP)

Let's face it, when 2020 started, most volunteer fire departments were already behind the eight ball due to decreased budgets, increased call volume and a significant decline in recruitment of new volunteer firefighters. For years, the recruitment of new members has become exceedingly difficult, and now with COVID-19 and civil unrest, recruitment has become nearly extinct in some communities.

This all leads to an important question: Should we be taking a serious look at merging with our neighbors?

For decades, "merger" was fighting words for many local fire departments. In fact, I have been run out of fire departments for just suggesting the idea of a merger.

I get it, none of us wants to lose our identity or ownership of our organization. Most of us have invested blood, sweat and tears in our local fire department, and many of us practically grew up in the firehouse, and our families have spent generations in those firehouses. Thus, mergers are like divorce for our membership because, like divorce, we have to separate and share custody of what we love and enjoy. But also like divorce, in some cases, the merger can provide a fresh start and an opportunity for all parties involved to be happy and successful. A merger could provide the opportunity for two or more organizations to better serve their communities.

## **FIRE DEPARTMENT MERGER BENEFITS AND RISKS**

As we know, change is hard and takes work, so let's review the risks and benefits of most mergers:

### *Merger benefits*

1. Improved service to the customer
2. Increased efficiency of resources
3. Improved training and fireground operations on mutual- and automatic-aid events
4. Reduction of resource overlap, leading to improved fiscal responsibility to your community

5. Larger team of responders to field your community's needs

### *Merger risks*

1. Loss of individual identity (ego)
2. Loss of community identity
3. Turf or ownership battles
4. Unfair distribution of resources or lack of representation due to the larger organization

From my perspective, the benefits here outweigh the risks.

### **START THE CONVERSATION – AND THE PROCESS**

They always say that the first step is always the hardest. You just need five seconds of courage to start a difficult conversation. This is certainly true for that initial leap of faith to start the conversation on mergers with your neighbors.

Here are some actions to address when starting the merger process:

1. Form strong automatic- and mutual-aid agreements to set the foundation for the two organization to work together at the street level.
2. Build parallel training programs that overlap. We build teamwork and comradery on the training ground. Provide a natural opportunity monthly, quarterly and annually for your members to interact with the neighbors.
3. Establish lines of communication at all levels of the organization, share meals together, truly create transparency between both departments.
4. Make it about “them,” not about you. It is easy to have the appearance that you personally benefit from the merger. If this is the case, you should reassess your position and maybe step aside. It is not about you; it’s about your members and your community.
5. Be humble, and be willing to give up what you have more than taking what you want.

By creating unity at the street level, it will become obvious to most of the members that merging makes sense, and the merger will be driven from the bottom up versus the top down. *Note:* Mergers are emotional, and if it appears that the merger is being forced onto the membership, you will find yourself in a battle that could last for generations.

### **FOCUS ON THE COMMUNITY**

The key: Be humble and honest with a laser-focus on the benefits to both your members and the community. The merger, if successful, will provide a stronger, more efficient service to your community. In the end, everyone will win if you stay focused on service to the community.

*Editor's note: Has your department been through a merger? If so, what was your key lesson through the process? Share in the comments below.*

## About the author


Jason Caughey is the fire chief of Laramie County Fire District #2 in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and an adjunct professor for Laramie County Community College, where he teaches on the principles of fire behavior. Prior to arriving in Cheyenne in 2011, he was the fire chief of Gore Hill Fire Rescue in Great Falls, Montana. He also spent 10 years working for the Montana Fire Services Training School as a regional instructor and regional training manager for the state of Montana. Caughey has been an active member in the "Kill the Flashover" project, led by Joe Starnes. He is also a current technical member of the UL Positive Pressure test committee and a lead instructor for the Ottawa Project "Knowledge to Practice." Caughey has a bachelor's degree in fire science from Columbia Southern University and is working on his master's degree in public administration. He is currently attending the National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer program. Connect with Caughey on [LinkedIn](#) or via [email](#).

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